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The strike on the Vandalia of Terre Haute: The fruits of class harmony

Although William H. Vanderbilt preached class harmony and the identity of his interests with those of the New York Central workers, and had told the press that they shared his view, few of his workers went along with his ideas. Only at the very end, when their resources were exhausted and their chances of victory were all but nonexistent, did the New York Central strikers place themselves at the mercy of the man who preached identity of interests. However, in the case of one walkout during the Great Strike—that on the Vandalia Railroad in Indiana—it was the strikers who stressed class harmony and identity of interests, and who upheld that principle almost until the end. But, as we shall see, they suffered the same consequences as the strikers who rejected the doctrine.[1]

When Tom Scott announced the 10 percent wage reduction on the Pennsylvania in June 1877, the members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen's Vico Lodge in Terre Haute, Indiana, whose wages had been cut 23 percent between 1873 and 1876, and then another 10 percent between August 1876 and May 1877, knew that the smaller lines, including the Vandalia, for which they worked, would hasten to imitate Scott's action.[2] On June 22, a week after the

strike began in the East, the firemen and brakemen in Terre Haute met in the Engineers' Hall to discuss the national and local situations. Robert Ebbage, the master of the Vico Lodge, was elected president, and, after some discussion, the men passed three resolutions to present to Riley McKeen, the Vandalia's founder and president. The first was to "respectfully request" a 15 percent increase to all employees, with a threat to strike the following morning if management failed to respond affirmatively. Second, they vowed to allow no freight cars to move until their wages were sufficient "to keep our families from actual want." Finally, the men informed McKeen that they would not use "in any shape or form intoxicating liquor in case we quit work." Eleven men, mainly firemen, signed the petition.[3]

When McKeen failed to respond the following morning, the strike began in Terre Haute at noon. In addition to the engineers and firemen, the six hundred machinists in the Vandalia repair shops also joined the strike. On Tuesday, July 24, with his employees in control of the depot and refusing to allow trains to enter or leave, McKeen informed the strike committee that he had not yet made up his mind as to what to do about their wages. He told them that since so much had occurred in the East during the past few days, he preferred to await an eastern settlement before committing himself to any set figure for his workers. On his own, either to prevent violence or to defuse the strike, McKeen himself stopped all trains, except mail cars, that originated in Terre Haute.[4]

After reading and discussing McKeen's letter, the strikers responded in a surprising way to his refusal to grant them a wage increase. They expressed "full faith" in McKeen's "honor and integrity," and in the belief that "he will do all he can to comply with our wishes." The strikers further resolved that they wanted no interference from "irresponsible parties such as tramps and roughs," that they would guard all railroad property, and asked support from "fellow citizens from all classes" to aid in "our resistance to the encroachments of capital upon unprotected labor." Arguing that the basic problem in Terre Haute, as well as nationally, was the lower

freight rates, resulting from corporate "kickbacks," and that the proper response was not to lower wages but rather to raise the rates, the strikers' resolution assured the people of Terre Haute that they did not intend to instigate any permanent conflict, for "as soon as our object is attained, then this organized movement is to be abandoned."[5]

This approach brought the strikers wide community support. Daniel W. Vorhees, Indiana's Democratic senator, and Mayor H. Fairbanks of Terre Haute both endorsed the strikers' demands and urged them to remain nonviolent. A Protestant minister, the Reverend Ewell, assured them that they had the support of the entire community. A local grocer was summoned to appear before the strikers' committee to answer charges that he was opposed to the strike. He defended himself with the statement that this was a ridiculous charge, since he himself made his money through sales to the workers and it was in his interest that they receive higher wages.[6]

Asked by the *Terre Haute Express* to explain the reasons for the strike, the strike leaders replied that the problem was the monopolistic practices of the major railroad corporations, especially Tom Scott's Pennsylvania line. As Mark Miller, chairman of the strike executive committee, explained, their fight was only with the railroad corporations, and therefore they did not favor any other strikes in the city, and certainly saw no reason for a general strike.[7] Robert Nesbit, another strike leader, argued at a meeting on July 26 that the strikers should allow passenger trains already in transit to pass through Terre Haute, for

> We . . . are not making war upon women and children. We are warring to break down the gigantic eastern monopoly, the Pennsylvania Road, in two words, we can put it—Tom Scott. It is not particularly upon Riley McKeen or Mr. Peddle [his superintendent] that we are warring. They, like us, are under the thumb of that road, and when they take up their thumb, they say jump.[8]

But this proposal went too far in the direction of class harmony. After communicating with other strikers in St. Louis and Effingham,

Illinois, the Terre Haute workers decided not to allow any but mail trains through.[9]

The general approach of the strikers becomes understandable when it is realized that Riley McKeen's Vandalia system was one of the few important lines in the Midwest that was not owned by a large corporation. When he bought the Terre Haute & Richmond Railroad from Chauncey Rose in 1869, McKeen simultaneously obtained a charter from the Illinois Assembly to build a connecting line across the state to St. Louis. While he did not receive any financial aid from the Pennsylvania in constructing the new addition, McKeen did receive from that system a ninety-nine-year lease for the right-of-way over their part of the roadbed. As one local historian noted in commenting on McKeen's control, "The P.R.R. was napping," for such a lease was unheard of at a time when the major railroads were consolidating. McKeen retained the lease until 1893, when he sold the road to the Pennsylvania line.[10]

The railroad workers of Terre Haute believed that Riley McKeen was as much under Tom Scott's domination as they were. They accepted his argument that he could not raise wages until an eastern settlement had been reached. While some of them may have viewed this as a stalling device, the majority of the strikers believed that McKeen really wanted to help them and was thwarted only by Scott's giant monopoly.[11]

It soon became clear, however, that Riley McKeen's view of class harmony differed from that of the strikers. On Saturday, July 28, a detachment of the Third U.S. Infantry, under the command of General Benjamin Spooner, arrived at Terre Haute under orders to open the depot. Spooner was acting under the authority of Federal Judge Walter Q. Gresham.

The Great Strike had spread to Indiana on Saturday, July 21, when the men on the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago line stopped work in Fort Wayne. On Wednesday, Fort Wayne's factory workers also quit. A week later, the strikers gave up when the sheriff told them that the United States Army was coming. The same scene was enacted in other Indiana towns, but not in Indianapolis.[12]

On Saturday, July 21, a large crowd collected in the State House courtyard in Indianapolis, and handbills were distributed calling for a meeting of the city's workers on Monday evening "for the purpose of sympathizing and taking action with our starving brothers in the East who are now being trampled under the feet of the railroad bondholders."[13] When Monday came, the strike had spread to the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati & St. Louis line, and then to the Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati & Indianapolis line, both of which ran through Indianapolis. In the afternoon, apprehensive officials moved all arms out of the United States Arsenal in Indianapolis, and fifty United States regulars who had been summoned from St. Louis moved in.[14]

Walter Quintin Gresham, then a circuit judge for the Circuit Court of the Seventh District of the United States—and therefore responsible for all the lines in his district that were in receivership—frantically wired the federal government for help. This plea was sent even before the workingmen's meeting that Monday night, which turned out to be completely peaceful.[15] But that same night, a small crowd stopped a train on the Indianapolis, Bloomington & Western line—a road in receivership. The following morning, before court convened, Gresham swore in his friends (including Benjamin Harrison, future president of the United States) as U.S. marshals, and announced that an emergency meeting would be held at noon. At that meeting, Gresham noted that the city was in the hands of a "mob," and that the sheriff, mayor, and governor were doing nothing about it. He recommended that a "Committee of Public Safety" be formed "for the preservation of peace." Thereupon, two companies were organized, comprising one hundred men each, were supplied with guns from the United States Arsenal and were placed under the command of General Daniel Macaulay.[16]

Despite Gresham's apprehensions, the strikers remained quiet on Tuesday. Fifty of them guarded their companies' property, and a strikers' committee prohibited all participants from drinking. But the trains did not move.

That evening, Gresham received word that no federal troops could

be spared to help his marshals start the trains. On Wednesday, therefore, he sent an urgent appeal to President Hayes in which he announced that the situation in Indianapolis was "most critical and dangerous." "The mob is the only supreme authority," he warned, "[and] there may be an outbreak any moment."[17] No sooner was this sent off than General Spooner visited the strikers at the railroad yards and explained to them the legal issues involved in stopping trains on lines in receivership. The strikers immediately relinquished control, and thirty minutes later all such trains were on their way, manned by men who were later left unpaid for their services.[18] Meanwhile, the U.S. Signal Service in Indianapolis was sending Hayes another view of the situation: "Not the least sign of violence," reported the sergeant in charge. But Gresham carried more weight, and Hayes casually ordered in two hundred U.S. troops from the South.[19]

On Friday morning, Gresham had the leaders of the strike in Indianapolis arrested, and that evening the federal soldiers arrived from Louisville. The following morning, General Spooner departed for Vincennes via Terre Haute, with fifty regulars, to open up the lines in receivership there and to arrest the chief troublemakers. After he had passed through Terre Haute and was in Vincennes, Gresham ordered him back again to open up the Vandalia line.[20]

The Vandalia, of course, was not in receivership, but Gresham had agreed to open the line anyway, as a courtesy to Riley McKeen. On the morning the troops were scheduled to pass through Terre Haute on their way to Vincennes, McKeen announced that he would reopen his yards in the afternoon. As the troops approached Terre Haute, the strikers relinquished the depot even before they arrived. After a short stop, the troops continued on to Vincennes. The strikers met, reaffirmed their demand for a 15 percent wage increase, and told McKeen that his action that morning had "insulted" them. After the meeting, many of the men reassembled at the depot.[21]

McKeen did not respond to the latest message from his workers. Rather, with the support of many of Terre Haute's "best people," he wired Judge Gresham at Indianapolis the following request: "Engi-

neers refuse to run our trains. I trust you will let the United States soldiers remain here for a few days. Please answer." Gresham immediately telegraphed Spooner at Vincennes, ordering him to return to Terre Haute. He suggested that the troops in Terre Haute would "have a good moral effect, and would be conveniently placed for duty at either Vincennes or Evansville." In conclusion, Gresham absolved Spooner in advance of any responsibility for violence in Terre Haute, although there had not even been a threat of violence up to that point: "If the Vandalia strikers think the troops are to operate against them, you will not be responsible for their mistake."[22]

When Spooner's troops arrived back in Terre Haute on Sunday, July 29, they found the depot again in the hands of the strikers. The general took command of a mail train staffed by master mechanics rather than by the regular engineers and, with his troops and without any violence, ran the train to Indianapolis. That same day, McKeen promised he would not discriminate against any striker. The strikers capitulated without obtaining any of their demands. At a meeting that night, the men voted to return to work the following day.

Secretary of the Navy Richard W. Thompson, a machine politician from Indiana and former chief counsel for the Terre Haute & Indianapolis Railroad (who viewed the Great Strike as "nothing more or less than French communism . . . so entirely at war with the spirit of our institutions that it must be overcome"[23]), wrote of the outcome in Terre Haute: "McKeen stood up firmly and manfully and I regretted I was not at home to help him—or that I could not send him at least a company of my marines."[24]

McKeen's pledge of no recrimination against strikers proved as fragile as the doctrine of identity of interests. No sooner had the men returned than they were informed that some of the strikers would be suspended pending an investigation of charges against them.[25] On August 1, Mark Miller and three other strikers were arrested by order of Judge Gresham on federal charges of contempt of court. At their Indianapolis trial, Riley McKeen was the chief

prosecution witness. They were sentenced to periods of from thirty days to six months.[26]

On this note, the Great Strike ended in Terre Haute. The strikers' vision of class harmony had not been able to survive the presence of federal troops!

PROCLAMATION.

St. Louis, Mo., July 25th, 1877.

FELLOW-CITIZENS: The daily press of the city—both English and German—persisting in misrepresentation of our movement in the present great struggle of our fellow-workingmen against the overbearing oppression of capitalists and monopolists,—we are compelled to issue the following in order to clear ourselves of the charges and abuses, which the daily press of St. Louis sees fit to throw upon us. Liberal thinking men may then judge, who is right and who is wrong.

As you all well know, work is very scarce now in all branches, and the compensation for work done is so little, to make it almost impossible for any man to make his bare living, and it is utterly impossible for married men to support their families. Where shall this end? If now, during the summer season, such is the case, what shall we do next winter? Has our government done anything for us workingmen? We say No! emphatically No! Therefore, fellow-workingmen, we MUST act ourselves, unless we want starvation to stare to our faces the coming winter. There is only one way—**Help yourself!**

To this purpose a meeting was held last night at the Lucas Market, where the following resolutions were passed!

Resolved, that we, the authorized executive committee of the Workingmen's party of the United States, do not hold ourselves responsible for any act of violence which may be perpetrated during the present excitement; but that we will do all that lies in our power to aid the authorities in keeping order and preventing acts of violence, and will do our utmost to detect and bring to punishment all guilty parties. We make an issue for our constitutional rights as American citizens—that is, the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our motto is, "Death to thieves, incendiaries and murderers."

Resolved, that, as every man willing to perform a use to society is entitled to a living. therefore, if our present system of production and distribution fails to provide for our wants, it then becomes the duty of the government to enact such laws as will insure equal justice to all the people of the nation.

Resolved, that, as the condition of an immense number of people now in forced idleness, and the great suffering for the necessaries of life caused by the monopoly in the hands of capitalists, appeals strongly to all industrial classes for prompt action, therefore, to avoid bloodshed or violence, we recommend a general strike of all branches of industry for eight hours as a day's work, and we call on the legislature for the immediate enactment of an eight hour law, and the enforcement of a severe penalty for its violation, and that the employment of all children under fourteen years of age be prohibited.

Resolved, that it is our purpose never to give up the strike till these propositions are enforced. **The Executive Committee.**

Mitbürger!

Da ein Theil der deutschen Presse — die **„Westliche Post"**—sich in gröbster Lüge und Gemeinheit über uns ergeht, sehen wir uns genöthigt, Euch Nachstehendes bekannt zu geben, und dann mögt Ihr als billig denkende Menschen urtheilen.

Wie Euch Allen bekannt ist, trotzdem daß wir jetzt Sommerzeit haben, die Arbeitslosigkeit allgemein, der Lohn der noch Arbeitenden aber so niedrig, daß es einem ledigen Arbeiter kaum möglich ist, sein Leben anständig zu fristen, noch viel weniger aber einem Familienvater. Wo soll das Alles noch hinaus? Wie muß es da erst im **Winter** werden? Hat unsere Regierung schon irgend welche Schritte gethan um die herrschende Noth zu beseitigen? — **Nein!** — Darum, Mitarbeiter, müssen wir uns selbst helfen; sonst können wir nächsten Winter in den Suppenanstalten oder als „Tramps" unseren Unterhalt suchen, während unsere Kinder in Lumpen gehen und verhungern müssen. Darum sei unsere Loosung: **Selbsthülfe!**

Um nun dieses auszuführen hat die gestern Abend am Lucas-Market stattgefundene, von mehr den Zehntausend besuchte Massenversammlung nachstehende Beschlüsse gefaßt:

„In Erwägung, daß die heutigen gesellschaftlichen Einrichtungen einer großen Masse unserer Mitmenschen nicht das Recht auf Leben erlauben, indem alle Producte und Productionsmittel von den Monopolisten mit Beschlag belegt sind, verlangen wir, daß die Regierung dahin gehende Gesetze erläßt, welche jedem Menschen das Recht auf Arbeit und mithin auf Leben garantiren.

Um daher Blutvergießen und sonstigen drohenden Vorkommnissen in unserem Lande vorzubeugen, fordern wir die Arbeiter in allen Zweigen der Industrie auf, die Arbeit einzustellen und sie nicht früher aufzunehmen, bis wir

1. einen durch das Gesetz garantirten achtstündigen Arbeitstag, und
2. das Verbot der Arbeit der Kinder unter 14 Jahren in den Fabriken—errungen.

Es sei ferner beschlossen, daß wir, als autorisirtes Executiv-Committee aller St. Louiser Sectionen der Arbeiter-Partei der Ver. Staaten, nicht verantwortlich sind für irgend welche individuelle Gewaltthätigkeiten, welche während der gegenwärtigen Aufregung verübt werden mögen, sondern daß wir nach Kräften darauf bedacht sein werden, Diebstähle, Brandstiftungen u. s. w. zu verhindern und die Verbrecher den respectiven Autoritäten zu überliefern. Wir machen dies als anerkannte Bürger zu unserer Hauptpflicht. Unser Motto ist: Tod allen Dieben, Brandstiftern und Mördern!"

Das Executiv-Committee.